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Public Range Lands in Grazing Districts

By R. H. RUTLEDGE, Director of Grazing
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WHEN the editor of the AMES FORESTER so graciously asked me for an article on the Taylor Grazing Act and its operation in the West, I saw a chance to render a small service to the great agricultural State of Iowa. If a better understanding of the tie between an agricultural economy and the western range economy may be had, that service may be worth while.

Within reasonable distance east of the Iowa farm live a great number of the Nation's industrial workers. These people must have meat of good quality—at a price they can afford to pay. A thousand miles or more west of Iowa, scattered in ten States, but bulking in area many times that of your fertile State, is the remnant of a former vast and unbroken public domain, from which the State of Iowa was once carved. In this arid section, the population is sparse and distances are great. A large part of this land is devoted to the production of cattle and sheep. The two-million-odd people of the range area consume but a small part of their products; meat, hides, and wool. In order to get money to buy other necessities, the producers of range livestock must sell their products to you, and to your neighbors. To continue to raise and sell those products they must have good range and stable operations. That, in a nutshell, is the reason for the Taylor Grazing Act.

The Taylor Grazing Act is seven and one-half years old. It is only one of the several laws that have characterized the conservation movement of the past decade. In the parlance

of the historian, the Act is too young to measure the results with accuracy, but from the standpoint of the livestock operator, the man who by sustained, profitable use of the public range must meet his taxes, his interest, his grocery bills, and the National demand for vital range products, seven years is a long time.

I shall try to appraise the administration of Federal Grazing Districts on the western range from the standpoint of (1) the situation; (2) the problem; (3) the approach; and (4) the result so far.

The Situation

The remnant of the once vast public domain totaled in 1934, about 185 million acres, located mainly in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. It is in these states where the 58 grazing districts, embodying about 144 million acres of public land are situated. This land receives generally less than 15 inches of precipitation annually and has been proven by long, and often bitter, experience to be unfit for profitable farming except where irrigation is practiced. Through the years, however, it has filled an important place in the general scheme of western development, because of its suitability to livestock grazing. For many years the settlers used the land on an "open range" basis, drifting from the higher to the lower altitudes in the winter, and reversing the process in summer.

The range livestock industry of western United States bears an important relationship to the national food supply and to national welfare. Approximately 50 percent of the lambs and wool and 25 percent of the beef of the Nation come from the previously mentioned 10 western States, often called the Public Land States. Few people of the humid areas appreciate the problems inherent in a dry country with vast areas of unfenced range. A lesser number know about the changes in public-resource thinking, range management, and range livestock husbandry which have taken place in the last decade. Unless one happens to live in the West one may have difficulty in comprehending the tremendous areas involved

in the western range; the recent development in the use of the public range resource, or the importance of the intermingled State and privately owned land as they fit into the present and future economy as a whole.

By enactment of the Taylor Grazing Act of June 28, 1934, Congress reversed its policy of the free homestead and introduced a broad land-use policy based on the premise that the residual public lands were in need of protection and management in the public interest. This reversal brought an opportunity to apply conservation methods; and a program for orderly and beneficial use of the public domain resources. To administer that part of the act, pertaining to grazing districts, the Grazing Service, Department of the Interior, was designated as the agency responsible for carrying out its primary objectives which are:

"To stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement and development, and to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range, and for other purposes."

The Major Problems

The problems facing administrators of grazing districts were inherited largely from an era of unrestricted, competitive, and sometimes indiscriminate use which had assumed the dignity of "custom" on the bulk of the areas "free to all who could use them." They are magnified by other factors such as a complex land ownership pattern, and great size. Established grazing districts embrace a gross area of about 266 million acres of which almost half are in private, corporate, and State control. Much of the public land is wilderness and desert, most of it is unmapped, some remains to be explored.

The extent of the area gives rise to a variety of conditions of soil, to high mountains above timber line. Growing conditions are equally variable. In the southwest, for example, are some of the best ranges and also such desert conditions that there is forage growth only after the winter, rainy seasons which may fail to materialize. Some northern ranges are covered with snow in winter, forcing stock to feed lots in the adjacent valleys. Other nearby ranges with no natural

water and only widely spaced developed waters are chiefly used when winter snows supply the water demands of livestock and wildlife. Such variety allows no uniform or blanket specifications for management.

In agreement with wide latitude in geography and great differentials in topography, there are widely differing uses of range at various seasons of the year. Some ranges are usable yearlong, others for only specific seasons. This is governed in major degree by the vagaries of climate, by the kinds of vegetation, the classes of livestock, the water facilities, but in no small degree by the will of the users or the other circumstances under which livestock are operated. In addition, there is yearlong or seasonal use by considerable numbers of big game animals—an important natural resource.

The land pattern is intricate as through the years the more desirable lands have selectively passed to private control, leaving in places only remnants in public ownership. In other places huge blocks of Federal land are dotted with State lands and with private holdings, whose normal and considered use depends upon the companionate use of the public resource.

Range livestock operations had developed in general patterns which had proven advantageous in various localities and also by the pursuit of the individual objectives of independent and resourceful men. The latter were often at cross-purposes with the desires of many neighboring operators. Countless disputes and long standing controversies were the rule on subjects such as sheep vs. cattle, dairy vs. beef breeds, steers vs. stock cattle, the goat problem, and the proportion of the range to be devoted to big game.

Over the picture hung the clouds of slow recovery of the industry from the depression and drouth and misuse which had made the range appear to be a fading resource. In addition to these, crickets, grasshoppers, inflated ideas of range dependability, over-extended credit, continued low prices, inability to stabilize the business on a solid foundation had put the stockmen generally in a frame of mind to insist that "something" be done.

Many citizens, who found it difficult to find jobs during the depression, homesteaded land which they knew would

not support them but which would furnish them an asset in lieu of wages. The remaining public lands were being cut up by land dispositions to such degree that they are becoming exceedingly involved for grazing purposes. Livestockmen were being forced to buy lands at prices far above the values of the lands for grazing.

Logical consideration had to be given to the needs of wildlife in the land-use program. Big game use of range, the trend toward game reserves and refuges, and the need for nesting and feeding grounds for game birds complicated the situation.

The Approach

The administration of grazing districts represents a departure from any previous attempt on the part of the Federal Government for either the management or disposal of the remaining public domain. This plan specifically takes into consideration the importance of the livestock industry in the national economy. At the same time it clears the way for a variety of other uses of land in connection with grazing or in place of grazing when the other use offers a superior claim to the land.

Experience indicated to the public and the livestock industry the need for regulated use of the public grazing lands under law. This, the Taylor Grazing Act furnished. It was recognized that, considering the wide range of conditions, and the variety of interests involved, such a law, and the rules under which it would operate, must be broad and flexible. The Taylor Act, therefore, was framed to provide a broad and cooperative basis for conservation and use of public lands, and to promote the proper use of private lands and water dependent upon the public ranges. The crux of the law is orderly use of large and small areas as good grazing practice dictates. The law gives preference for grazing privileges to landowning stockmen, settlers, and owners of water and water rights in or near the grazing districts and measures the degree of such preference by the character and former use of lands and waters to be benefited.

Certain principles of range management evolved through the experience of other and older agencies pointed the way

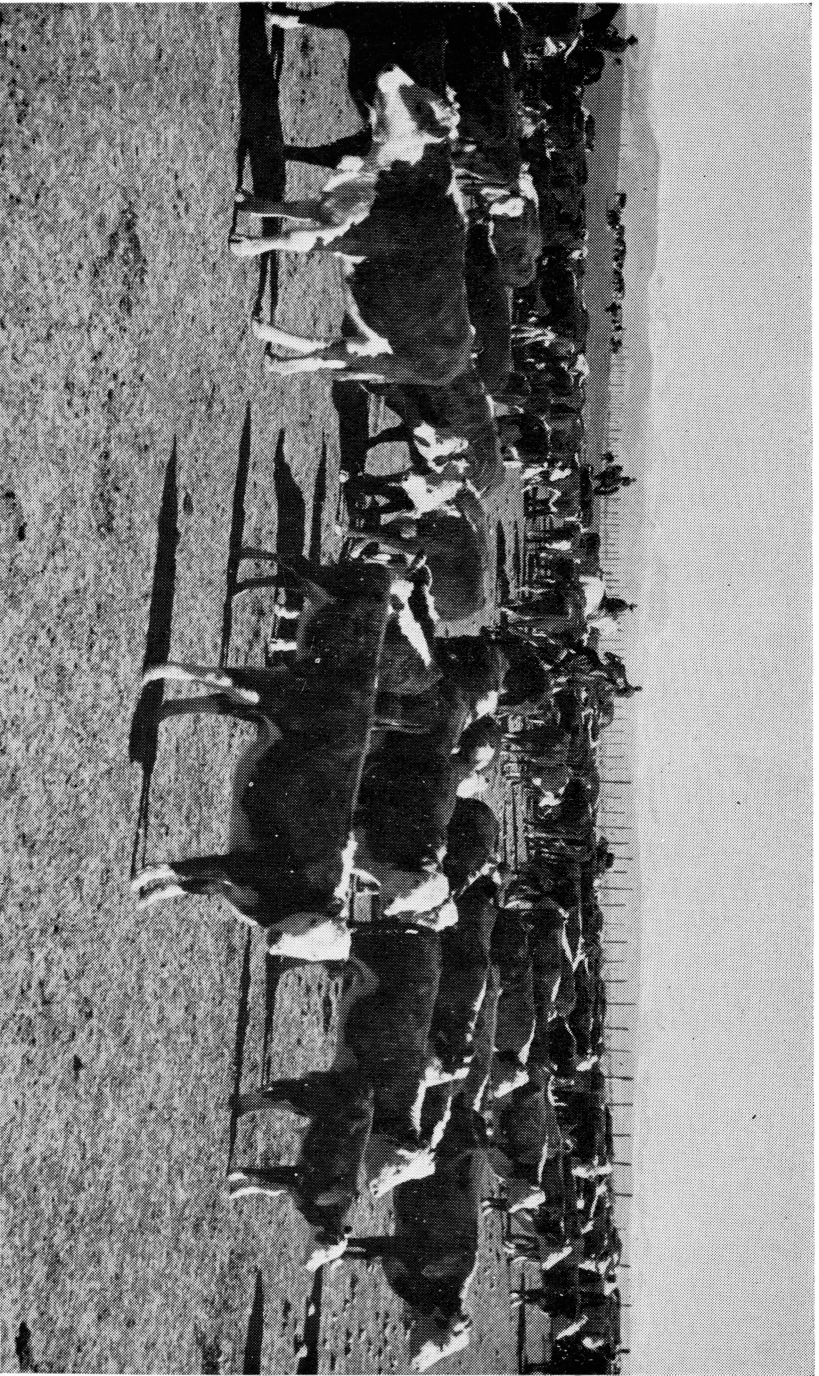
or warned against pitfalls in establishing procedures. Co-operative efforts were engaged in with Federal and State agencies, and with livestock associations interested in the management of range resources. Colleges interested in the several phases of livestock production under range conditions, and experiment stations engaged in research on range forage crop or animal-industry problems gave valuable assistance.

The advisory board system of electing representative stockmen for council in range administration was inaugurated, to take advantage of the wealth of experience gained by livestockmen in managing livestock under range conditions. This gave an opportunity for presentation of problems peculiar to each locality, to practical men having intimate knowledge of local causes and effects. Probably no better demonstration of the democratic principles of self-government through the participation of the governed is exemplified, than in the working of these advisory boards both in establishment of regulatory rules and in recommendations as to those who are entitled to share in the use of the range. In this connection it is notable that no grazing district has been established except where local demand for it was expressed through a vote of the stockmen of the area.

It was recognized that dovetailing the interests of ranches and range in sound year-long operations would be most effective. No one agency could formulate sound conservation plans without consideration of the effect on lands in other control or used at some other season of the year.

Information on record concerning the extent, character, and usability of the federally owned lands was meager or piecemeal. Information concerning the extent, character, and usability of the private holdings of the livestock operators was equally sketchy. In order to act intelligently in determining the amount of grazing privileges to be granted individual applicants in any locality, it was necessary to amass specific information concerning the companionate use of all feed resources in each district.

Systematic surveys were made of Federal range areas which mapped and classified the public land ranges for appropriate grazing use. Other examiners inventoried the



Fall roundup and separation of herds in a Grazing Service holding pasture near
Pinedale, Wyoming. Herds are being shaped for winter operations.

private land holdings of livestock operators as to forage production and use as base for year-long operations in connection with public ranges.

This is a long and slow process and in order to provide for the livestock industry using the range when administration was inaugurated, a second and shorter method was resorted to. Statements in detail were called for from each applicant for Federal range privileges. These statements were reviewed by members of the local advisory boards who were in a position to evaluate the information furnished. The advisory boards also made the first recommendations as to the proposed stocking or grazing capacity of the various local units of Federal range. On this temporary basis individual licenses were issued for the use of specific range areas for specific numbers and classes of livestock for specified periods of the year. By a combination of methods, term permits have been issued to approximately half the 21,000 individual operators who are permitted or licensed to use grazing districts with more than 11 million head of livestock.

Provision was made for hearings on appeal from the recommendations of the advisory boards and from decisions of the district and regional graziers. By simple and inexpensive procedures, these decisions can be appealed to the Secretary of the Interior if an operator believes that his claims for privileges have not been fully satisfied.

Throughout the range country, facilities for watering, handling, moving, or controlling livestock on the range were inadequate. This was one of the principal factors responsible for past misuse, congestion, and unequal distribution of livestock on public ranges. The act provides that 25 percent of the fees collected for grazing privileges shall be returned to the range to be expended for the construction, purchase, and maintenance of range improvements. The several states recognized the same need and each voted the 50 percent of grazing fees paid to them under the act for like purposes. This immediate development of the long neglected areas was augmented by work of enrollees in CCC camps and is the most direct method of alleviating range abuse.

Local problems are considered locally by the district

grazier in cooperation with the local advisory board. Matters of important nature are referred to the regional grazier who is responsible for the entire program in his State. Administrative regions conform to state lines except Nevada and California which are combined into one region. There have been established 58 grazing districts in the 10 States to date. For convenience in handling range matters of group interest, the districts are further divided into divisions, units, and allotments.

To simplify the land pattern, and to develop a more unified pattern of control, susceptible of economic management, three methods are employed: exchanges of title under provisions of the act; cooperative agreements and exchange-of-use agreements with private land owners; and by leasing State, county, and railroad lands for public use under the Pierce Act of 1938. This act provides that the Secretary of the Interior may rent private grazing lands for use by licensed and permitted livestock, provided the rental charges are not in excess of income derived from the use of the lands.

Immediate steps were taken to provide a set of regulatory rules for the guidance of administrative officers in the interpretation of the Taylor Grazing Act and translating its provisions into an action program. In formulating these rules, the results of experience under the licensing system were sifted and analyzed. The objective was guidance in principle rather than specific "do's" or "don'ts." The intent is to keep the rules flexible enough to allow for the wide variety of conditions in an area extending from the Canadian to the Mexican border and from the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the great Plains. In the formulation of "rules of the range", the administration relied on the experience and council of the district advisory boards and other stockmen in the several districts.

The approach may be summarized as follows: A small administrative staff selected primarily for broad experience in range livestock problems, a technical staff with background and training in keeping with their work, decentralization of authority to field officers, and strong participation of the livestock industry in affairs of the range.

The Results

There is a different viewpoint in the range livestock industry of the West today as compared with that of a few years ago. Reasons for the change are many. Former free and easy operational methods have been modified as economic conditions tightened, production costs increased, and demand for certain types or qualities of livestock products swelled or decreased. Shifts from grain and fibre crops in the agricultural states to forage crop production caused material changes in livestock population so there is consequent competition at the livestock markets where formerly there was little.

With assurance of tenure and definite control of range allotments, operators are afforded an opportunity to plan programs in range use and livestock production on a long-time basis. Climatic conditions, especially precipitation, have had a decided influence on forage production, varying from severe drouth in many years to bountiful rainfall in a few others. The current situation is well above normal, and there is confidence that reasonable use of current forage will cushion the change when rainfall is low. More results of animal husbandry and range management research have become available, pointing the way to better nutritional standards as both desirable and profitable. Evidence of greater production in weights and values from fewer animal units serve to emphasize the importance of quality in animals themselves and the advantage of liberal food allowances on the range and winter feed lots.

Better records of livestock operations give a sounder basis for adjustments to stop unprofitable practices, decrease expenses, reduce losses, and justify sound credit ratings. Financial agents take cognizance of forage resources available to the applicant for a loan rather than consider only his numbers of livestock. More dependable records of the extent and character of forage resources and their use in year-round operations allow knowledge to replace guesses. Record keeping by livestockmen has opened the way for studies of the actual net returns from animals and from the use of ranges.

These records have been most convincing arguments for better husbandry practices and conservation of grazing resources.

The efforts of many Federal, state, and county governmental agencies have been pointed toward cooperative consideration of problems of the livestock industry. The Taylor Grazing Act mentions cooperation in five of its 18 sections. Many stockmen and responsible public agencies have discovered that dealing with single phases and fractional areas in land use are not in self-interest.

All of the foregoing have had some share in motivating changes. It is hardly possible to isolate the extent of influence of any one factor. Many of the changes were inaugurated solely by or at the instance of stockmen. Some were induced either directly or indirectly by the action programs of several agencies of the Federal Government. Among these, the Grazing Service has played a far-reaching part. Most of the progress has been made possible only by the wholehearted organized cooperative efforts of the livestockmen themselves. The trend on the range seems to favor organized purposeful effort to benefit many, rather than few, and to take a long-time view in progress toward a common objective, namely, the beneficial and proper use of land.

Any program that serves to reverse established customs and practices, even though its objectives are proper and beneficial, must face the test of public opinion and full understanding of both motives and action. This is especially true of a program with "long time" objectives where only part of the objectives are capable of immediate fulfillment or are directly measurable. For this reason many of the accomplishments of the Grazing Service in administration of public range lands can now be reported only as trends in the planned course. Future generations may pass judgment on ultimate benefits obtained.

Range abuse has been definitely halted, and the great recuperative powers of Nature have been given a new chance to rebuild the range country. One proof of recuperation is the increasing range fire hazard due to increased vegetation. Denuded ranges formed fire breaks that kept range fires from starting or limited their extent. Now the fire situation in

many areas approaches those described by old-time residents of the Plains.

There is a decided trend toward balanced use of the products of farm and range in those areas where climate dictates winter feeding of livestock. The nomadic or "tramp" operator who creamed the forage as he drifted from range to range and contributed little to the local tax structure, has been eliminated from the picture. There is a definite tendency toward stabilizing operations around established headquarters, resulting in reduced operating expenses and better management of livestock. Many large and small outfits now are operated under fence. Conservation of both range and livestock has resulted from less trailing and limited drift of stock. There has been a real start toward adequate index records of the range users, their lands, places of operation, seasonal movements, and more accurate measurement of range use.

Progress has been made on needed adjustments in land control through the sale, lease, exchange of use of lands, and through cooperative agreements.

Round table discussions have produced a unity and tolerance among stockmen who are now working together for the common good. Sheep and cattle wars have ceased. The representatives of each group used to oppose each other on general principles. They now act together for the good of all. The interests of wildlife are met with sensible provisions advantageous to both livestock and game.

Orderly patterns of use of range have replaced individualistic use. Through water development and other range improvements, better distribution of livestock has been accomplished. Principle emphasis has been placed on providing livestock water where urgently needed to afford planned use of forage. Roads and trails have been constructed to facilitate access to range areas where formerly livestock could not go or could receive only inadequate attention from their owners. Thousands of miles of fences have been built to assist in management of both livestock and range. Ranges are being protected from such detrimental influences as fire, rodents, insect pests, and erosion. Over 200,000 acres of depleted range have been reclaimed through artificial revegetation. Losses

due to predatory animals, which bulk large in the range livestock business, are being reduced through cooperative efforts of stockmen and State and Federal agencies.

States and counties have received many benefits as a result of the range conservation program, not only from revenues paid to them as a proportionate share of grazing fees collected, but also from increased revenues from lands in state and county ownership. The improved livestock economy has resulted in lessened tax delinquency on private range lands.

The position of financial agencies which furnish credit to the livestock industry has been strengthened by the establishment of sounder loan bases. There has been a greatly increased understanding of the need for conservation of the soil which underlies the range lands and on which future production must depend. Water, which serves in the promotion of forage growth, is being conserved and water, whose availability to livestock make grazing possible, is being developed.

The results accomplished to the present time by no means represent the full attainment of objectives. They do indicate a fair start on a thoroughly considered program, which proposes maximum use of the forage crop consistent with the conservation of soil, water, wildlife and other natural resources. Perhaps one of the most encouraging signs of progress is the active participation of the citizens who are most directly affected. Advisory boards have given unselfishly of their time and knowledge and have demonstrated their ability to get down to the root of perplexing problems. They have accepted the responsibility for their considered actions and have taken group action for group benefits in an impersonal manner.

As a result of all these influences, the western range, and the livestock industry itself are in a better position than ever before to produce their share of the vital necessities for a Nation at war. The stockmen are well advised and alert to the fact that increased demands for beef, lambs, and wool, can be more readily met when livestock and range are in good condition.